

Soviet 50-Meter Proposal

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The Soviet Union has proposed in the UN Outer Space Committee that the prior consent of the sensed state be required for dissemination of space acquired imagery having a resolution of 50 meters or better.* This proposal has already been accepted by the Soviet Union's COMECON partners in an agreement signed in May 1978. The proposal is also referred to in the Soviet non-paper of January 9, 1979, cautioning the U.S. against releasing high resolution photography acquired by reconnaissance satellites.

Since the previous Soviet position had been to oppose the release of data without the prior consent of the sensed state, the new proposals can be viewed from the U.S. standpoint as a more moderate position.

The U.S. has, however, opposed any international controls on data dissemination, and at least to date, most other countries (in particular developing countries) have argued that their consent should be obtained before dissemination of any data respecting their territory (in addition a few countries continue to believe that prior consent should be obtained before data are acquired).

*This draft will not explore the various ways in which "resolution" can be defined.

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It is not yet clear whether they will accept the Soviet argument that the most valuable data economically fall in the range of 10-50 meters resolution and, therefore, that a 50 meter or better rule for prior consent should satisfy their needs. However, a number of countries may come to view the Soviet proposal as a reasonable compromise.

The present trend in the U.S. civil space program is toward acquiring data of higher quality than 50 meters. Indeed, the policy basis has been established for the civil program to acquire data at resolutions of 10 meters and under some circumstances better than 10 meters. The French SPOT satellite is being planned to collect data at resolutions of 20 and 10 meters.

The Soviet proposal would not preclude the acquisition of such data. However, in requiring prior consent of the sensed state before such data could be disseminated, the proposal would impose substantial obstacles to making the fullest use of the data. The proposal is presumably intended to bar open dissemination within the state which acquired the data as well as broader dissemination. Moreover, where such data might be essential for resolving regional or sub-regional problems, one state could preclude

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effective use of the data by withholding consent regarding release of data respecting its own territory.

Despite difficulties such as the foregoing, the question arises whether the U.S. should seriously consider some form of the Soviet proposal -- perhaps offering a counter-proposal based on 10 meters rather than 50. Such a counter-proposal might be time-limited and might provide for limited exceptions (i.e., for higher resolution releases under some emergency circumstances.)

Such a counter-proposal might at least temporarily improve the image of the U.S. in the remote-sensing debate. However, the following caveats should be recognized:

- 10 meter resolution imagery does disclose militarily useful information. Consequently, the Soviet Union and other countries will undoubtedly reject it as the basis of a compromise.
- In view of the Soviet argument that imagery in the 10-50 meter range is the most valuable economically, developing countries would doubtless view the U.S. proposal as self-serving rather than forthcoming.

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- By offering the counter-proposal the U.S. would have accepted the principle that some informational restrictions or data dissemination are acceptable. We would then be under great pressure either to accept the Soviet proposal at a compromise level of, say, 25-30 meters or even more stringent restrictions desired by developing countries.
- Finally, even if no agreement were reached, a U.S. move in the foregoing direction would be a marked departure from our past position emphasizing freedom in the exploration and use of outer space.

The foregoing arguments do not necessarily lead to the conclusions that the counter-proposal approach should be ruled out, but they should be weighed in considering such an approach.

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